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ABSTRACT

Background, rationale, and consequences of a plan for teaching introductory undergraduate psychology are described. The setting is a college where eight to ten members of the psychology department have traditionally shared the teaching of introductory courses. The faculty recognized that there was not consensus on the content of an exemplary introductory course in psychology, so each professor tended to stress his or her own specialized area: human learning, psychobiology, or motivation and emotion, for example. Ultimately, the faculty decided to name the sections according to their content, making certain that several fundamental topics were included in all sections. Also, one general course open only to freshmen was established for those with weak backgrounds. All other students are required to take any two specially named introductory sections before electing a nonintroductory yearlong course in experimental psychology. The author believes that this fragmented approach to teaching introductory psychology is better than a core course approach because the field of psychology is a fragmented discipline. One problem which has been identified is the minimal transfer between method and content of the introductory courses to the experimental psychology course. A potential problem, that faculty would become more restricted to their interests, has not occurred. (AV)

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The Evolution of a Program of Introductory Courses: Fragmentation and Integration

Douglas K. Candland

The plan I shall outline differs in many aspects from those of the companion articles. The most obvious difference is that the plan involves the teaching of introductory psychology in sections of from 20 to 60 persons, a luxury no longer so common as it was once typical. Much that has been written about the problems of the introductory course involves how to teach large numbers of students effectively. Little has been said about how to teach small numbers effectively, perhaps because one of the recurring myths of our field is that small classes are easily taught well because the size insures student interest and eventual competence. An auxiliary myth is that once the size exceeds a certain number, say 50, it no longer matters how many students one addresses, since the apparent values of the small class are lost. The prevalence of myths suggests to me that a truth is being disguised. In this case, the truth is that although the size of a class constrains or even dictates the choice of teaching strategies, class size itself is of far less importance than what and how we teach.

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In this essay, I wish to describe the ways in which one plan for the teaching of introductory psychology evolved. It is a system that has evolved for similar reasons elsewhere, for given the academic equivalent of selective pressure--that

of making psychology relevant to students whose goals and expectations are often different from those of the instructor --it is not surprising that instructors have found but a small number of useful adaptations. The adaptation I wish to describe can be viewed, like a figure-ground illustration, as encouraging either fragmentation or integration.

During the past few years our Department faced the many well-known difficulties of the introductory course shrewdly by not offering an introductory course. This decision has the virtue of honesty, for it reflects our opinion that there is not general agreement on the content of an introductory course in psychology. Seen another way, however, it may be said that we have between eight and ten introductory courses, including social, child, mathematical, motivation and emotion, human learning, perception, theories of personality, and psychobiology.

Throughout the 1960s our staff of ten, serving a college of 3,000 students, offered multiple divisions of the introductory course. An average of 300 students each term elected introductory psychology. Each professor selected his or her own textbook and conducted the course in a way appropriate to his or her style. In some years, each course had a different textbook, but in one remarkable year all instructors independently chose the same text. Because each person teaching a section had specialized knowledge and research interests, the courses differed substantially in content and teaching methods even when the same text was used. Understandably, the social psychologist looks at psychophysics somewhat differently from the animal behaviorist. It is this

diversity that supplies contemporary psychology with its adaptability. It is a potentially healthy symptom, even though it is this very diversity that is fundamental to what is referred to as "the" problem of the introductory course. Over the years, it became known among students which sections emphasized which aspects of psychology. The innocent freshman took the hindmost. Random chance determined whether the introductory section met the freshmen's past interests or excited new ones.

In 1970 the members of the Department decided, with many reservations, to name the sections in honor of their content. It was also agreed that each instructor would make certain that students were versed in certain topics that all agreed were fundamental to psychology. Among these were the bases of psychophysics, experimental design, conditioning and other such war-horses of our tribe. Students were permitted to take any two introductory courses before electing the yearlong course in experimental psychology. Nonmajor students were also restricted by the two course limit. Such expendable house rules were found necessary to encourage depth and to discourage excessive window-shopping.

By polling students, we discovered that approximately 50% of those taking elementary courses had experienced a course in psychology at the secondary school level. These courses varied so widely in content and depth that it was clearly impossible to attempt to build upon this earlier work in the way characteristic of more orderly sciences. In order to accommodate students who wished a general introduction to the field, we established a general course open only to freshmen.

In materials sent to incoming freshmen, it was stated that this course was recommended for those who wished a general introduction and who thought it unlikely that they would take further psychology. Our experience has been that this course enrolls approximately twice the number as any of the specialized courses. By limiting this course to freshmen, we hoped to provide the instructor with a group of students of reasonably homogeneous background. We received some complaints from students in certain degree programs who pointed out that because their curricula were so proscribed, they were unable to select an elective in psychology until after their sophomore year. We encourage these students to take one of the specialized introductory courses. Our experience is that this has been a successful solution, for upperclassmen in this situation often have developed specialized knowledge in engineering, natural sciences, or some other field, that is useful in their study of one of the specialized advanced courses.

There remain problems. Whoever teaches the yearlong experimental course points out that it is impossible to tell which, or sometimes if any, of the introductory courses a student has taken. The transfer between the method or content of the specialized introductory courses and the experimental course is minimal. Evidently, transfer from the single general course is no greater than that for the specialized courses. I suspect this confirms what experienced teachers understand: What we teach is not

necessarily what is learned. Learning, at least the learning of psychology, is more cataclysmic than gradual, more the shaping of ways of thinking than of selecting information most suitable for short-term memory storage.

Students from other disciplines sometimes complain about the two-course limit we impose, pointing out that they expect to be greatly aided by taking three or four specialized introductory courses. My impression is that this argument seldom has educational merit. When the request is reasonable, we often placed the upper-class student in the corresponding upper-class specialized course. Good students tend to have few difficulties in such an adjustment, a fact that may reflect the obvious: Capable students should be encouraged to do work that meets, if not exceeds, their grasp.

It is arguable that our use of specialized introductory courses discourages breadth among our students. I have no clear answer to this charge, for there are no data except perhaps these: Each year we require junior majors to take the GRE field tests as a means of determining the strength of our curriculum. There has been no decrease in the mean or distribution of these scores over the last decade, suggesting that however breadth is acquired, it is not necessarily done by the requirement of specific courses. If one is to require breadth, it may be wisest to do this by setting out requirements for the upper-class major for a comprehensive examination.

One fear at the onset of this program was that faculty would become more restricted in their interests rather than more understanding of the many aspects of psychology. Some

have argued that one function of the general course is to maintain faculty awareness of events in a number of fields. This has not been our experience, although this may be due more to the criteria used in selecting faculty than anything else. My own view, unsupported by nothing but my informal observations, is that we feel more duty-bound to integrate our specialized subject matter with other branches of psychology than was the case when we felt required to divide a general course into eight subtopics in which we had varying degrees of interest and competence. Quite simply, underclass students will not permit the instructor to teach a course that describes nothing but, say, psychophysics and scaling. They insist that this subject matter be applied to what they perceive as "real" problems and that the conscientious instructor be forced, not by his colleagues or administrators, but by students, to make clear the generality of his or her specialty. My impression is that this interplay between student demands and faculty abilities leads to more academic alertness on the part of my colleagues and myself than was the case when we worked within the more proscribed system in which each taught a section of a general course.

Above all, the system I outline has the virtue of honesty. I think many of us overrate curriculum, for when we are dissatisfied with what is learned our first notion is to reset the curriculum. Usually this means nothing more than changing requirements without violating the tacit law that prohibits us from discussing the content of one another's courses. I am not a fan of curriculum tinkering. I believe

it best to set out a curriculum that suits the abilities of staff and the interests and abilities of the set of students concerned, and that within broad outlines, one curriculum is as productive as another.

It troubles me greatly that psychology, as a field of inquiry, remains so fragmented that the introductory course is either so general as to leave the student with the impression that there is no core in psychology or so doctrinaire that those students who cannot accept one persuasion to the exclusion of all others are removed from the flock. If the true state of affairs is fragmentation, let us so teach.